



Being Seen, Being Heard

THE LEARNING DISABILITY ENGLAND ANNUAL CONFERENCES

In person | 4th March

Online | 11th March

Welcome to Learning Disability England's 2026 Conferences

This year's conferences are focused on Being Seen, Being Heard. We've come a long way in the last 40 years from people with learning disabilities being unseen, unheard and hidden away in institutions.

Today, lots of people are speaking up and fighting for a good life. There is lots of work for us still to do, to speak up, share power and create space to make sure everyone has a seat at the table.

There is a role for us all in this, what can you do as an individual? With the organisations you work with? As a member of Learning Disability England? To make sure people are seen and heard.

We hope across both conferences you get chance to think about this and be inspired by the brilliant collection of speakers, workshops, book launches, music acts, and a coproduction zone we've got lined up for you.

In this paper you'll hear from our conference sponsors on how they are supporting people to be seen and heard across their organisations, communities and society. Big thanks to them in helping make this year's conference happen. If you are joining us in Birmingham, check out their stalls to chat and learn more!

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With Thanks to our Kind Sponsors:



Stronger, Louder, Together!

Patience in communicating with people is essential – my ideas for making travelling more accessible

Lucy Thirkettle – SeeAbility Associate with Lived Experience



Why is accessible transport important to you?

It's the only way I get around and it's important for my independence. I can do what I want, when I want. I can see my friends and family, which is really important to me.

I've just supported SeeAbility to make a new easy read guide on travelling by train (seeability.org/Train-ER), which I hope helps more people feel confident when getting public transport.

What makes transport inaccessible?

Bus timetables are too complicated. Late buses make it difficult to get where I'm going and I sometimes miss a connection, making me late for work.

I have to be really careful getting on and off trains due to the large gap between the train and platform. In rush hour this can be difficult.

What works for you?

When it's less busy it's better, so I avoid rush hour normally. There's help if I need it, which is very good – they will help me, but I don't travel alone as a rule.

How would you improve public transport?

Easy read, picture symbols and Braille would help the timetables be much more accessible. Sometimes they use complicated words too – simple language is so important.

It would be helpful if ALL buses were talking buses, so you know when it's your stop. This would give me time to get ready and leave the bus safely. If the bus arriving at the stop said the number and where it's going, it would help me get on the right bus!

What would you say to the people that run public transport and the transport minister to help them improve?

I would like them to meet with me so I can get my voice heard. They need to communicate with services like gas and water to make sure the bus routes are not disrupted – and tell people if they are. If buses are diverted sometimes I wouldn't know and I'd have to walk a mile to another stop, which can make me late.

The government are working on an 'Accessible Travel Charter'. How do you think they can include the voices of people with lived experience?

Learning disability should be thought about, along with people who have a vision impairment and wheelchair users. The charter must be easy to understand, using picture symbols, simple wording and larger print. Patience in communicating with people is essential.

[Read more about SeeAbility's Listen Up! team at seeability.org/ListenUp](https://seeability.org/ListenUp)

Love Me Tender



Competitive tendering has turned support into a process where lives are bought and sold. It wastes time, kills creativity, and strips away human connection—the very thing that makes support work.

In the past, people were sold to the lowest bidder. Now, with fixed hourly rates, the game is still about who writes the best bid, not who is the best fit. People and families rarely understand the process or who “wins.” I reckon nobody wins.



The portal system is absurd: a new opportunity pops up, you click, download documents, skim a pen picture, and then play “bullshit bingo”— writing what you think commissioners want to hear, not what you’ll actually do. Pen pictures have improved slightly, but many still fail to show people in a positive light.

Recently, I submitted a tender written honestly, based on person-centred planning and human rights, admitting our failings and detailing our plans to improve. It scored 32/100. Maybe it was a poor bid—or maybe bullshit wins.

People often approach us because they’ve heard good things, yet they’re shocked to learn they can’t just choose us—even with a direct payment. Meanwhile, some providers thrive because procurement law rewards polished bids over honesty and connection

and some providers have a polished bid writing department. Commissioners who know their patch are overruled by rigid rules and the best bid wins – even when all of their intelligence points otherwise.

Tendering dehumanises everyone. It has broken the third sector, ruined local solutions and wiped out advocacy. It confuses support with jargon and models, when what matters is someone in your front room treating you as an equal and figuring life out with you. That’s what usually works.

There are better ways. Four years ago, we supported a woman out of an Assessment and Treatment Unit. We built trust over a year, planned with her, involved everyone, and created a life she wanted. Three years later, she’s thriving. That happened because we were trusted early—not tendered out to later.

What needs to change?

1. Give people and families real control over who supports them and the budget.
2. Involve providers earlier to co-create solutions.
3. Scrap the portal-based bullshit bingo nonsense and make tendering human.

Right now, people are stuck choosing from what’s available, not exploring what’s possible. 98hrs and seven sleeps...Until that changes, the system will keep failing— and calling it “provider failure” when nobody wins.

Reflecting on our time as a Rep Body

As a Rep Body we wanted to reflect on and celebrate Learning Disability England as we reach our 10 Year anniversary. Some of us are in our first term as reps, others on our second, some of us have been around since the very beginning. Reaching 10 years is a huge milestone and some of us wanted to share our memories and proud moments over that time as well as our hopes for the future.

We want Good Lives to be a reality for everyone. We want to make sure human rights are respected.

Rep Body Elections

In 2025, we held a Rep Body Election and are really pleased to welcome Paula Strike as a family rep, Nathaniel Lawford as a paid supporter rep. Jack Marshall and James O'Rourke were re-elected.



We want to say a massive thank you to Scott Watkins and Ivan Olbrechts who stood down at this election. They have made huge contributions to Learning Disability England during their terms, and we look forward to working with them as members.



Keep In Touch

The Rep Body always want to hear from members, it helps them shape their decisions on what Learning Disability England does. Keep an eye out for them at Members Network Meetings, Meet the Reps meetings or drop them an email on info@LDEngland.org.uk

Our Proud Moments and Memories

As a Rep Body we are really proud of how much Learning Disability England has grown in the last 10 years, today we nearly have 800 members being louder together!

We are living our values as a strong organisation where we all speak up together as equals and don't hide from difficult challenges or issues. Our reputation is growing, as are our opportunities to influence government, policies and partners

We are part of a wide range of work and projects with many partners, is impactful and important to members. We are also proud of our conference and the opportunity we create for everyone to come together in person to building a world where we all belong and thrive.

Our Hopes for the Next 10 Years

In the next 10 years we hope Learning Disability England continues to grow as an organisation and movement. We want to change attitudes so society sees people with learning disabilities in a positive way.



Our Journey, Their Future

JMS Trust has been a Learning Disability England partner for the last 8 years.

The trust has worked to empower people with learning disabilities and their families to imagine and create their own future. We know that planning your next steps or what happens when a parent carer is no longer around can be both an emotional and practical challenge.



As the Trust's work comes to an end, we wanted to create a resource that would inspire you when thinking about what is possible in your young persons future and offer a roadmap for the start of your journey.

With the help of the people we've worked with, we have pulled together stories of success and the bumpy road to get there. You can read about the different projects, and their differing approaches and advice. Each group has shared what they learned in hopes of make the next families journey a little easier.

Find the resource here:



OUR IMPACT

MAKING OUR VISION AND THE VISION OF THE GROUPS WE SUPPORT, A REALITY ✨

 17 PROJECTS SUPPORTED ACROSS ENGLAND	 70 YOUNG PEOPLE IMPACTED
 64 FAMILIES IMPACTED	 4 HOUSES BOUGHT

JMS Trust has supported groups of families to set up their own supported living, creating bespoke and person-centred homes where people can thrive.

Throughout our work we have been impressed with families creativity and commitment, no two projects have been the same.





Working Together across MacIntyre

MacIntyre

Providing support...your way

In 2025 MacIntyre created the “Innovation Hub”. Led by MacIntyre’s Best Practice team, the aim of the Hub is to work through some key areas of activity which are important to MacIntyre; to identify the barriers; to create a plan and to then pass over to local teams to make it happen.



The first Hub project is Co-production, also called Working Together. We believe that working in equal partnership with autistic people and people with learning disabilities improves support, enabling people to live the life they want.

It aims to ensure that by the end of 2026 every area across MacIntyre has access to advocacy, creating real, everyday opportunities for people to have their voices heard and influence decision-making at all levels. The team’s recent roadshows have made sure everyone has been involved from the start, helping shape the work and connecting with others across the organisation.

Good communication is key, so the team are sharing regular updates including news articles, a MacIntyre Podcast and an interview on the Sui Ling Show. They’re making their way around the organisation to hear different perspectives, both in person and online.

One of the first meetings was with MacIntyre’s Managers who will play a big part in shaping this work locally. Sui Ling and Paul from the team planned the session together. They didn’t want it to be a one-way conversation; they wanted people to feel involved, relaxed and ready to talk – and they got creative!

With just one hour together, they packed in plenty. Here’s how Sui Ling described the day and why working together matters so much:

“I was excited to be at the managers’ meeting. It was important for me to talk about the Innovation Hub and show the packs so staff could take them back and share them with their teams. We all need to understand what we’re doing!”

I liked asking my Chat Show cards and hearing everyone’s answers. I also enjoyed the Perfect Day activity and listening to people share their ideas.

Co-production means speaking up with others and having your voice heard. It means setting up My Voice groups across MacIntyre.

It’s important to include people because we want more people involved in the Innovation Hub. We need staff to be engaged, which helps more people take part.”

We’ll continue to share updates on this project on our website and social media.

www.macintyrecharity.org

Social media: @MeetMacIntyre

Sharing Stories Brings Us Together

I want to tell you about Beyond Words Book Clubs. They are a safe space for people with learning disabilities to make friends, have fun and talk about the issues that affect their lives.

They use Books Beyond Words, a series of word-free, age-appropriate picture stories that explore a huge range of topics. By reading what they see in the pictures as a group, members build a story prompted by the images and informed by their experiences and feelings.



That's why we've set up Book Clubs in libraries, cafés and other community spaces around the UK. We are currently creating 300 new Book Clubs for free through our Book Club in a Box Project.

Thanks to generous funding from the National Lottery Community Fund, Beyond Words has developed a free box of resources. It can easily be sent out to organisations and individuals who want to set up a Book Club in their local area. The box contains everything you need to start your Book Club and is completely free of charge to anyone in England.

It's not just what I think. The Beyond Words Book Club - 'Polly's Picture Stories', has been a great success for the people supported by the Aldingbourne Trust. The Aldingbourne Trust told us:

“Our attendees are very engaged with the books and really gaining the confidence to participate in discussions, which often digress in all directions! Our members always look forward to Polly's Picture Stories and proudly wear their membership badges in anticipation. Debsy said it has given her confidence to chat more with friends. Hannah really loves the stories and likes naming the characters. Sam said that it helps her to chat through experiences, and she gets support from her friends.”



“Book Clubs are so unique – and they work to welcome everyone”

The Friends for Life – ‘Making Friends, Making Memories’

Future Directions supports adults with learning disabilities, autism and mental health needs who live in Greater Manchester, Lancashire and Yorkshire.



As part of the organisation we have The ‘Friends for Life’ group. This is a friendship group for people supported by the organisation and members of the community. The group was created by the people supported by Future Directions.

We believe friendships are important. Friends help us feel happy, confident, and included. Being part of Friends for Life can help people feel less lonely, less isolated, and less bored.

We support people to make new friends and keep in touch with old friends building friendships that last, everyone is welcome.

We ask the people supported by Future Directions what they would like to do and we organise fun events and activities that bring people together. These take place within Future Directions community run cafe and in the local community across the North West.

We run activities all year round. We have regular events such as a community choir and Green Super Heroes recycling arts and crafts. We also plan day trips to places including Chester Zoo, York, Morecambe, and Liverpool.



Other activities include theatre trips, meeting up for lunch or a meal out, steam train days out, canal barge trips, litter pick walks, ten-pin bowling, and events at our community café. Some of our special events include ABBA Mania, summer BBQs, Valentines Parties, Christmas lunches, and meeting the reindeer.

We also run “Do Something New” taster sessions.



These give people a chance to try new things in a safe and supportive way with their friends.

Activities have included indoor skydiving, go-karting, indoor skiing, flight simulators, pottery making, circus workshops and dance classes.

Friends for Life is about trying new things, meeting new people, and enjoying life together. Most of all, we want everyone to have good times, create memories whilst develop strong and meaningful friendships

More Than Words: D/deaf Communication and Inclusion

British Sign Language (BSL) is a rich and complex language, with its own culture and community. Its growing connection to the arts can be seen in the increasing presence of Deaf people using BSL in popular culture.

Jonathan and Shane, are both supported by Achieve Together, are presenting at this year's Learning Disability England conference share their experiences of British Sign Language (BSL) theatre.

Shane: "Going to and acting in the theatre I feel relaxed and calm and I like to act out in a visual language as people don't need to understand BSL or English fully as they can see the story unfold, it's like feeling a story book rather than having to read one."

Jonathan: "When receiving a script and it's written in English its quite frightening, because the language and grammar is different. Having it translated into BSL is easier for me and when information is acted out it is visual and therefore it's clearer to understand. I enjoy sharing a story, I feel like I can let go of my inhibitions, I can act out large or small, it's a release and helps me to let go."

Beyond this experience of the arts, being understood still holds many barriers for people who are D/deaf. It can be difficult to access interpreters and when interpretation is available, there is no guarantee that information is being conveyed in a way that meets someone's additional communication needs.

It must be remembered that learning disabilities, neurodivergence, autism and other characteristics add a layer of complexity to communication and inclusion; being D/deaf and using British Sign

Language increases this complexity as society remains largely disconnected in its understanding, practice and engagement with BSL and Deaf awareness.



Scan for BSL Translation:



It is easy to overlook the fact that when accessible information is not provided, people are effectively denied the capacity to understand and consent. This is a breach of their rights and places them at risk.

While access to an interpreter is an important step, many people require information to be broken down further, using relay interpreters, deaf-blind sign language, lip speakers, additional time, visual resources, Easy Read formats and other tailored communication approaches.

Reflecting on this complexity and what makes a good life, what steps will you make to bridge this gap?



Achieve together





Good Lives: Looking Back, Looking Forward

By Gary Bourlet

This year is an important moment for reflection. Learning Disability England is marking 10 years since it began in 2016. During that time, I have seen real progress happen. Alongside the work of finding direction as an organisation and a movement, there has been meaningful action and change.

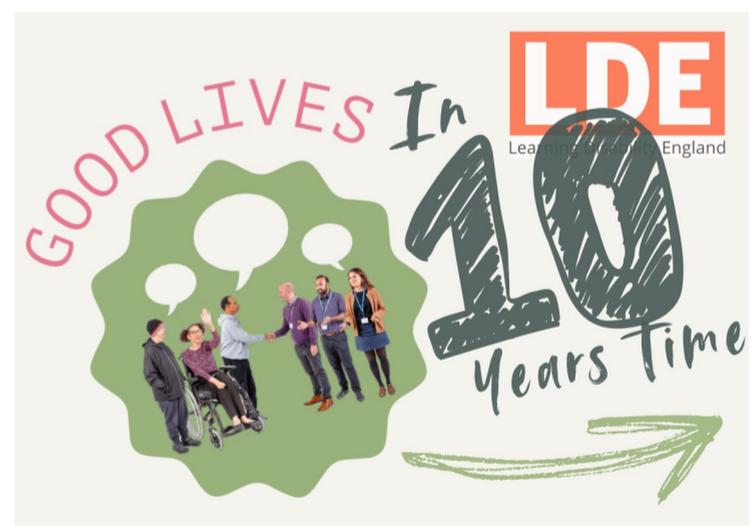


One of the most powerful shifts for me has been seeing what becomes possible when people with learning disabilities, families, allies and paid supporters work together as equals. This has not always been easy, especially in the early years. I will be honest—I sometimes wondered, *is this really possible?* Now I know that it is. I have seen the lasting change that can happen when people stand side by side.

For me, the Good Lives Framework gives us shared guidance, language and a clear focus for change. You can see the benefits of having this when you look back at the 2024 elections. Members used the Good Lives Manifesto to speak directly with decision-makers across the country about what people with learning disabilities need to live good lives and lots of them listened ([read our latest impact report](#)).



In 2025, the framework was refreshed. This brought new ideas for change, more inspiring examples of good practice, and a new chapter, “Health for a Good Life,” developed with the brilliant team behind BILD For The Future. There was also stronger effort to include the voices of people with profound and multiple learning disabilities and people from Minority Ethnic communities.

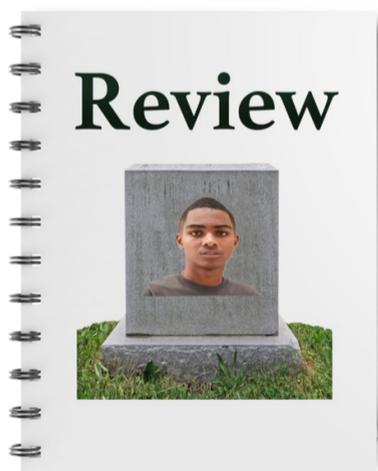


There is still much more progress to be made though. In 2026, there are plans to bring together a network of people with profound and multiple learning disabilities within Learning Disability England’s membership, to help ensure their lived experience and expertise shape decisions.

The Good Lives Action Collection continues to grow, bringing together real, rights-based examples of action that support good lives. I encourage you to think about whether you have something that belongs in this collection and to share it. Even small steps matter. When small changes come together, they create something much bigger.



But alongside this good work, it is important to stay focused on what still needs to change. Too many people with learning disabilities and their families are not yet living good lives. Too many people do not have a real home, meaningful relationships, the right support, or the chance to speak up and be heard. Many lives are also still being cut tragically short, as we see in the most recent LeDeR report



The challenges people face today, and faced throughout history, must never be forgotten. At the same time, recognising progress creates hope and energy for what comes next. A strong foundation now

exists, alongside a growing movement committed to change. The next step feels clear: take Good Lives forward. The coming ten years hold even more possibility!

This year's conference theme, 'Being Seen, Being Heard', feels especially meaningful to me as I look back and ahead. There was a time when people with learning disabilities were expected to be *seen and not heard*. Over the past ten years, I have seen many more opportunities for people to be seen and heard in their communities, in decision making and policy, and in the media. This shows that something is beginning to shift.



My hope for the future is simple but powerful: that people with learning disabilities are truly seen, truly heard, and fully valued in every part of society. Because when that happens, Good Lives become possible for everyone.

SCAN ME

Check out the Good Lives Update and how you can share your work and action through the Action Collection:



Being Seen and Heard at Work Matters

Having a job, when you have a learning disability or a physical disability, can mean you face far more barriers than your non-disabled colleagues. Challenging these barriers can lead to low confidence, shyness and anxiety. In some cases, it can also lead to discrimination and an increased risk of losing your job.



**Anthony
Collins**

These challenges, and how to address them, were discussed recently at an event jointly hosted by Anthony Collins, the British Institute of Learning Disabilities (BILD) and Learning Disability England (LDE). At the event, people passionate about empowering disabled people through work discussed the importance of moving beyond awareness and creating lasting change in the workplace.

For employers, a lack of understanding and education about learning disabilities specifically, and a lack of funding for employment support can put them off from recruiting disabled people.

Often, there is limited training for managers about the importance of inclusion and how changes can be readily made to communicate with and include disabled people within the workplace. If changes to

working patterns or new equipment are needed to support someone's employment, an employer might see this as a barrier.

Given the right support and guidance, the event explained how workplaces can unlock long-term independence for employees with learning difficulties, creating an inclusive environment for all. By working together and sharing their experience, employers can ensure that disabled people benefit from improved access to employment and thrive at work.

For example, employers could form support networks and share information that could be helpful to others. Policies should be introduced or updated to underline the importance of equality, diversity and inclusion, and training initiatives should aim to share management best practice.

Demonstrating our commitment to removing barriers to the employment of disabled people, [Anthony Collins](#) actively participates in a number of national programmes and employment support initiatives, such as Connect to Work. The firm is also lobbying Government for changes to policy and funding to support people with learning and physical disabilities in accessing employment – for example, better public transport links and improvements to the benefits system to encourage more employment opportunities.

For more information about developing policies and creating initiatives to support the employment of people with learning disabilities and physical disabilities, contact Anthony Collins' employment team - [Employment Law Solicitors for Employees – Anthony Collins Solicitors](#)

Stronger, Louder, Together!